

Best Practice for Determining which Applications will be Unscored (Streamlining)

Background: A "triage" procedure has been used for a number of years at the NIH for the review of investigator-initiated grant applications. Beginning with the February 1995 round of study section meetings, all CSR regular study sections have incorporated a streamlined review process as part of their R01 peer review procedures. Subsequently, this process was extended to the review of all R-mechanism applications. Only those applications judged highly meritorious are discussed at the study section meeting. The intent is to ensure ample time for in-depth discussion of and discrimination amongst competitive applications. In many instances, the process results in shorter study section meetings and savings in costs. In an environment where a decreasing proportion of grant applications are being funded, CSR believes that study sections could streamline approximately 50% (between 40% and 60%) of the applications under review.

Streamlined Review Procedures: The Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) should discuss streamlining procedures with reviewers before the meeting to ensure that all reviewers clearly understand the procedure. The most effective practice for developing the list of potential unscored applications is to use an average of the preliminary scores entered in the Internet-Assisted Review (IAR) System by all assigned reviewers and readers. The first step is for the SRA to consider approximately the lower 60% of these average scores as determining the group of potentially unscored applications. Then the SRA removes from the list those applications scored by any of the assigned reviewers in the region that defines the top 15% of preliminary average scores. If the study section is reviewing more than one mechanism, this procedure should be followed for each mechanism separately. If possible, before the meeting the SRA should contact telephone reviewers on applications below the potentially unscored line to determine whether they wish to discuss any of these applications [alternatively the telephone reviewer can be called when the application comes up in the normal rotation of applications].

At the beginning of the meeting, before individual applications are discussed, the SRA or the Chair announces individually the applications (applicant's name and order of review; neither the title nor the application number need be read) on the unscored list and asks the members if anyone wants the application discussed. Because conflicts may be in attendance, reviewers should be strongly discouraged from announcing that they were one of the reviewers. Rather any one interested in having the applications discussed should simply state this and nothing more. If no one calls for the application to be discussed, the reviewers mark it unscored on their vote sheet.

Alternatively, the list of applications that may be unscored can be provided to all reviewers in their desk folders. Reviewers are asked to examine the list and request that an application on the list be discussed. Reviewers again mark the applications that remain on the streamlining list as unscored on their vote sheet. Since only an assigned reviewer may nominate an application to be streamlined, additional nominations for streamlining are not allowed during the streamlining process. Non-concurrence by a single member (whether regular or temporary) is sufficient to bring the application to full discussion at the meeting.

Occasionally, it may also happen that study section members will unanimously agree, either at the outset of the meeting or later, during discussion of applications,

to designate additional applications as not requiring full discussion and scoring. The fact that a discussion may have occurred does not require that the application be scored. If the discussion is substantive enough to move the outcome to streamlining, a resume and summary of discussion should be provided.

If 50% of applications are not scored the remaining applications should receive scores in the range of 1.0 to 3.0. This will require reviewers to recalibrate and change scores from the preliminary scores assigned in IAR. It is best that recalibration be done when reviewers announce their initial level of enthusiasm for the application, i.e., before the application is discussed in detail. If a reviewer believes that an application is in the lower half the reviewer should assign it a score of 3.0 or greater. Since all competing R01 applications reviewed by a study section, **whether scored or not**, are considered in the base for calculating percentiles, there is no mathematical advantage to altering the number of applications that are not scored. Reviewers are asked to modify their critiques, removing, for example, criticisms that are negated through discussion or by reading other critiques.

Even though mail reviewers do not score applications, SRAs should provide them the scoring paradigm and request that they post tentative numeric scores in IAR.

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